



Qualifiers

In Chapter 28 of *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation* I said, 'Such easy generalisations have a certain beguiling attraction for us. It's easy to slip into a categorical claim ('all', 'every', 'always', etc) to avoid the effort of weighing up the evidence carefully and selecting just the right qualifier ('almost all', 'almost half', 'few', etc) that reflects the right strength. They also give us a sense of instant certainty, that we have suddenly uncovered something which makes things so much clearer. We can plan our lives and our thoughts with so much confidence as a result.'

Oscar Wilde

In the hands of skilful writers such instant clarity can also be very witty. Much of the humour in the work of Oscar Wilde was of this type. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* he writes:

If you pretend to be good, the world takes you very seriously. If you pretend to be bad, it doesn't. Such is the astounding stupidity of optimism.¹

It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious.²

Their effectiveness depends upon us accepting that in 'every' case when people pretend to be good or bad this claim is true and, likewise, in 'all' cases people can be divided between charming and tedious and not between good and bad. These statements are witty precisely because they draw sharp, categorical distinctions, which get us to think about things from a perspective we wouldn't otherwise have entertained. In the following line from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, even though we can doubt whether this is true of all philanthropic people, it gets us to think about a certain class of people in an entirely surprising and unexpected way:

Philanthropic people lose all sense of humanity. It is their distinguishing characteristic.³

Exercise

Sherlock Holmes

In Arthur Conan Doyle's stories involving Sherlock Holmes the intention is different, but it works in just the same way, in this case to demonstrate Holmes' legendary skills of deductive detection. In *The Greek Interpreter*, Holmes justifies his assumption that a man in a hotel lobby is an officer in the British army, who has just returned from India:

'Surely', answered Holmes, 'it is not hard to say that a man with that bearing, expression of authority, and sun-baked skin is a soldier, is more than a private, and is not long from India.'⁴

Explain why this is not a sound conclusion.

Answer

Once you analyse this argument you can see it takes the following form:

- 1 (All) Men who have this bearing, an expression of authority and sun-baked skin are soldiers higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India.
- 2 This man has this bearing, an expression of authority and sun-baked skin.



3 Therefore, he is a soldier higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India.

As you read the story the argument seems persuasive enough, but, when you bring to light the hidden qualifier 'All', the weakness of the major premise is revealed. It's not true that *all* men with this bearing, an expression of authority and a sun-baked skin are soldiers higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India. There may be any number of explanations for someone having these three characteristics.

What Holmes means, of course, is that 'many' men who have them are soldiers higher than the rank of private and recently returned from India and, therefore, this man is 'probably' one too. But this sucks all the certainty out of the argument, leaving it seriously weakened.

¹ Oscar Wilde. 'Lady Windermere's Fan' in *The Importance of Being Ernest and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 15.

² Wilde, 'Lady Windermere's Fan', p. 17.

³ Oscar Wilde. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), Ch. 3, p. 35.

⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle. 'The Greek Interpreter' in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes' Short Stories* (London: John Murray & Jonathan Cape, 1980), pp. 481-2.